

# COMMENTARY

## WHEN THE RED ARMY LIBERATED PINSK

*How Could We Know There Were Two Hamans?*

JULIUS MARGOLIN

### I. September 1939

WAR seemed unlikely to us in the summer of 1939. Thousands of people with no ties to bind them to Poland were in a position to pull up stakes, but thoughtlessly gave way to inertia. The Jews, for the most part, made little effort to extricate themselves. Hitler was on one side, the rest of the world on the other. It was scarcely conceivable that Germany might in-

volve herself in war on two fronts at once.

Not until the evening of August 23 did war appear inevitable. On that date, the world learned of the signing of the Hitler-Stalin pact. With Stalin's blessing, the pogrom began in September 1939.

FROM the 1st to the 17th of that month, we were witnesses to the pathetic spectacle of Poland's disintegration. A country of thirty-six million people—a whole civilization,

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Most tragic history, someone has said, is a chronicle of might-have-beens—omens misread, choices missed, decisions taken too irresolutely or too late. This eyewitness report of one of the most agonizing episodes in Jewish history describes how, in 1939, East European Jewry failed to recognize—indeed, how could they have?—in the advancing Red Army a force representing what was in the end to prove one of the great historic destroyers of Jewish life. This report is taken from the first four chapters of a book written by JULIUS MARGOLIN in Russian under the title *Travels in Prizonia*, but to date published only in French translation as *La Condition inhumaine: cinq ans dans les camps de concentration soviétiques* (Calmann-Lévy, Paris, 1949).

In June, 1940, shortly after the end of his narrative as given here, the author was arrested by the Soviet police in Pinsk and sentenced to five years at forced labor. It took him another two years after his release from the sub-Arctic to escape from Soviet-dominated territory and regain his home in Palestine, where he lives today in Tel Aviv. Dr. Margolin is a highly regarded thinker who writes on philosophical and Zionist subjects. One notes how much this memoir documents what Paul Kecskemeti has to say in his article "How Totalitarians Gain Absolute Power" (page 537, this issue) on the key role for totalitarianism, both Nazi and Communist, of the process by which successive groups of human beings are labeled superfluous and marked for liquidation as "iniquitous enemies" of the people. It need hardly be mentioned that the Communist purge trials now going on in Prague, in which the Jewish people is being accused before the world as a conspiratorial, treasonable group, gives a poignant and topical relevance to both this memoir of Mr. Margolin's and the Kecskemeti analysis. (The excerpts from Mr. Margolin's book have been translated in one part from the French and in another part from the Russian, by Waldemar Hansen and Shlomo Katz, respectively.)



with all its virtues and drawbacks, with historical traditions and a culture dating back a thousand years—collapsed like a house of cards. The war was lost from the outset, when the Polish troops below Poznan fell back before the German tanks.

The Germans crawled forward like a cold, giant reptile, and every night the radio brought us the uncanny voice of the master race, a slow, venomous speech, its nasal twang charged with mocking triumph and menace. The German broadcasts intended for Polish consumption used to begin with Moniuszko's *Polonaise*. To this day, I cannot hear that slow and solemn music without shuddering.

On the fifth day, at dawn, I left Lodz. A telephone call had informed me earlier: "There's a place for you in the car; we'll wait fifteen minutes." That morning the Germans were thirty miles from the city. I took my briefcase and left. It promised to be a bright and shining September day. I remember thinking: "Perhaps it will be all of a month before I reach home. I ought to take my overcoat." Turning back to the house, I took my topcoat down from the rack, then hung it up again; instead, as a double precaution, I took along my heavier winter overcoat bearing the label of a Lodz clothier, "Ewigkeit." Armed with "Ewigkeit" and my briefcase, into which the maid had stuffed—why, I shall never know—my bedroom slippers, I left Lodz.

Unlike the other Jews of Lodz, I knew perfectly well where my home was: Palestine. My family had been settled there for some three years, and I had come to Poland that summer as a mere visitor, my sole tie with her being a Polish passport—and the feelings of a Polish Jew.

The patriotism of the Polish Jews belongs to the past now. There are no more Polish Jews. The Poles now living in Berek-Joselevitch Street will never know either us or our feelings. But as I began my Odyssey that morning, I was suffering from a genuine emotional upset; in my thoughts the Polish tragedy took precedence over the tragedy of my own people—which I ought really to have been thinking of.

**WE** RAPIDLY left Lodz behind us. There were four of us in an old black Buick headed for Poland's eastern frontier. (Later that night the mass exodus from Lodz began;

tens of thousands of people fled. We were fifteen hours in advance.) On both sides of the road lay woods and fields, meadows bathed in the summer sun, the Polish earth. All the way to Warsaw, eighty miles, we were escorted by German planes; they seemed to regard their mission over Poland as an occasion for amusing and harmless sport. Passing at reduced speed through small market towns crowded with people and traffic, we saw everywhere the signs of rising desperation and panic.

Warsaw, in a breathing spell between air raids, was boiling like a cauldron. Sax Place was jammed with cars from distant places. The Hôtel de l'Europe was packed to the doors. Our gas had run out, and we lost two days searching for more. On the fifth day of the war the trains had stopped running except at night, and even then it was impossible to board them, they were so crowded.

We left Warsaw on the 7th of September, at eleven in the morning. We crawled all the way to Minsk-Mazovetzky. The confused mass of vehicles and people choking the road was indescribable: pedestrians, people on horses, baby carriages, open and closed trucks, buses, wagons, taxis, motor vans with cars on them, wheelbarrows loaded with miserable belongings. Women tugged children by the hand; young men in uniform marched along with knapsacks and suitcases. Once in the middle of this crowd it was impossible to get out, and we were simply carried along. Suddenly, flying very low, German bombers would appear (all the way to the Rumanian frontier we never saw a Polish plane). The crowd would scatter to all sides, like a flush of birds before a hunter's gun. But the hordes of refugees were not bombed that day. On the next, however, the Lublin highway became the scene of carnage, and the road surface was covered with blood.

After Minsk-Mazovetzky, eighteen miles beyond Warsaw, the road cleared. But we were not yet free of the planes. All the towns along our route were marked by bombs. The Germans seemed to be everywhere at once. Siedletz was in flames as we passed, and cottages were burning in the valleys through which we drove at full speed, pursued by the droning in the sky. On the outskirts of Mendzygetz we stopped to wait for the end of a raid. It seemed, somehow, that now one



last spurt forward would tear us away from the war. One last effort—and all that would be left would be a hot summer's day and the undisturbed quiet of a country road where a bearded Jew drove slowly past in a wagon.

A hundred and twenty miles east of Warsaw nobody had the least idea of what was actually happening. The Poles counted, in their fantasy, on help from the West, on British air power, on the French breaking through the Siegfried line, on the intervention of the Red Army. Officers lied to their soldiers; the local papers boasted of a Polish cavalry offensive in East Prussia, of bombings of Berlin, and a French occupation of the Saar.

At Kovel we found a peaceful Jewish town with forsaken gardens, wooden porches, great courtyards, and an inn full of distinguished visitors from Warsaw. Barefoot urchins sucked their thumbs and goggled at the unusual visitors sitting outside the tavern: dozens of cars, swarms of ladies in elegant traveling clothes, big industrialists from Lodz, and the deputy mayor of Warsaw himself. At the far end of the street was the kibbutz, where young Jews were still serving their apprenticeship for a future in Palestine. Portraits covered the walls; the tables were littered with literature that had now become useless. Here everything was too late. "Escape," I wanted to tell them, "don't trust your elders any more. They don't know anything, they can't do anything for you, they are no longer responsible for anything!" But it was too late for arguing.

We arrived in Lutsk at nightfall, part of a long line of cars with their headlights out. The next stop was Rovno, crowded with refugees from Cracow, Lvov, and the provinces. On their way through Rovno ministers of the Polish government told cock-and-bull stories about a counter-offensive that was being organized against the Germans, and then discreetly disappeared in the direction of the Rumanian frontier.

At Tarnopol we were struck by the complete impassivity of the Galician Jews, with their phylacteries and black gowns. They seemed unconcerned with all that was going on about them. Having put themselves into God's hands for once and all, they had decided not to cross any bridges till they came to them. So they waited patiently until they could go back to their businesses.

In the crowd at Tarnopol we saw, however, the first signs of demoralization—and of the coming Nazi order. In a narrow lane I first heard, from the mouths of young Polish army nurses dressed in khaki and carrying gas masks, expressions of venomous hatred toward Jews, cries for a pogrom. The nurses were impatient. A few days later Polish children, some of them no older than six years, attacked aged Jews, men and women, on the streets and tore their hair out with their little hands.

ON THE 15th of September we arrived at Czortkov. Two days later, awaking to a calm summer morning, I decided to go to the *starosty* and ask for a pass to Zalestchiki. To my great surprise, I found the place empty. Office doors swung wide, desk drawers were pulled out, not a soul was in the corridors. In a rear office two clerks stood by a window, looking at planes circling overhead.

"Their planes, obviously," one of them was saying in a trembling voice.

I brought forth my request, but they hardly listened to me. "For God's sake, go anywhere you want to! . . . This is a fine time to ask for a permit."

As I left I stopped in an adjoining room and turned on the radio that I saw there. At that moment the text of Molotov's speech was being broadcast, the official communiqué announcing to the world that at dawn of that day, by reason of the collapse of the Polish Republic, the Red Army had crossed the frontier to take under its protection its brother peoples of the Western Ukraine and White Russia.

One hour later we left Czortkov in full haste. Our gas barely lasted to the Rumanian frontier. We passed Polish troops, their eyes on the horizon, wondering why the Soviet tanks hadn't arrived yet; their officers had told them that the Red Army was coming to their aid.

At Zalestchiki a road block stopped us. Afraid of being caught by the Red Army, we decided to take the road to Sniatin, ninety miles away, but only three miles from Rumania. We got there at one in the afternoon; the road to the frontier was filled with a solid line, two and a half miles long, of military vehicles, trucks, and requisitioned private cars. That night the Rumanians opened their frontier. Our Buick took its place in one



of the three lanes of traffic, and inched into the darkness. The road was alive with feverish talk, voices calling to one another, horns honking. In nervous expectation we came to the sacred border line, where a Rumanian officer stood under an arch with a lantern in his hand, writing down the number of people in each car. "Next! Next!"

Our turn came at dawn. We were allowed to go five yards over the frontier line. A Polish officer was helping the Rumanian officer pick out the Jews. "Your papers!" He read our driver's passport: "Moishe Schimkevitch. . . ." The names of the others in the car were scarcely less incriminating. They asked us to get out, and we had to go back to the rear of the line on foot, since the Rumanians kept our automobile. "Let's not leave any cars to the Bolsheviks!" the Rumanian explained in German. Near us a Frenchman was cursing because they refused to let him pass. It was explained to him that there was a Jew in his car, a chance companion. Everything was settled very quickly: the Jew was dislodged, and the Frenchman, overjoyed, drove off. How nice to be French!

Still, they let us keep our suitcases. It began to rain—hard—and in the downpour we dragged ourselves with our luggage back to Sniatin. I must have been a sorry sight, for on the outskirts of the town a Jewish woman came out and invited me to rest and take some tea. Such was my first experience in the role of Wandering Jew.

That same day I, together with some other Palestinians, made a last effort to return to Palestine: we proposed to the Rumanian authorities that we be allowed to go by automobile as far as Constanza, under police guard, in direct transit to the boat. We waited half a day, on a little frontier bridge, for the reply to be telephoned from Czerhovitz, and were finally turned away with insults.

**T**HE following day the sky was cloudless, the sun shone, music blared, and everybody was in the streets. During the night the Soviet army had entered Sniatin.

The red flag waved from the tower of the town hall; tanks were parked in the main square; the streets teemed with people. Crowds surrounded every Russian soldier, besieging him with questions as everybody shoved to get a look. The soldiers were good-

natured, and answered the questions without a trace of surprise or embarrassment.

It was only several years later, when I was inside Russia, that I understood what a farce had been acted out that bright morning by the laughing soldiers of the Red Army—how the sly dogs from Yaroslav and the Ural had strung us along with their hogwash about the paradise of the *kolkhozes*, and boots at sixteen rubles a pair! Obviously, they had received special instructions, but must also have been motivated by that special Russian patriotism which takes pleasure in mocking Poles. The Jews, however, immediately had doubts. When they heard, "In our country, we have everything," they began to ask sly questions: "Have you got Copenhagen?" Naturally they had Copenhagen—whenever they wanted it!

Everything became clearer still when the local Red Army headquarters ordered the reopening of stores and declared that the Russian ruble was worth a Polish zloty. Immediately, a bargain-day crowd of Soviet buyers rushed into the stores. "A zloty for a ruble!" Whatever merchandise was in stock was given them for nothing, as a bounty accorded to victors. Later I saw officers of high rank enter the empty stores and, not knowing how to read the Polish signs, ask what there was to sell. They bought everything and anything: nails, luggage, bathing suits, never stopping to ask the price. And the Jewish storekeepers, who at first had added a mere ten or twenty per cent to their prices, weren't slow to realize that these people *needed* everything, and at any price.

Sniatin was blissfully content. In the crowded stores the officers, busy with their purchases, were the soul of politeness. The townspeople organized a welcoming program in honor of the Red Army and decked the town out with bunting; seven hundred citizens marched past the Soviet headquarters, carrying red flags and crying hail and hurrah. Most of the paraders were Jews, some were Ukrainians; but there were no Poles. In view of the fact that Sniatin had around five thousand Jews who had good reason to be glad that the town was being occupied by Russians, and not Germans, the number of Jewish enthusiasts was actually not high. However, the Poles didn't see the thousands who stayed away; for them, it was a "Jewish demonstration." That evening a woman



teacher complained to me bitterly of the attitude of the Jews of Sniatin.

IT WAS not easy for us to bring ourselves to leave the neighborhood of the Rumanian frontier. We hadn't yet given up hope; we looked for more contacts to get us across, we lay in wait for a chance. But how long could one stay without attracting the attention of the Soviet authorities? By night, in a private house, we gathered to listen to a radio, our only contact with the outside world. Warsaw was still holding out, the Red Army pursued its advance, we were still waiting for a miracle on the Western front. Our sleepy little frontier town was like a small island of silence.

The roofs of the Ukrainian *isbas* were now covered with corn and pumpkins. The Russians set up their headquarters in the white building of the Zionists, its pediment still bearing the Star of David. And we, lost Europeans to whom all this seemed but a dream, borrowed books from a private library that still functioned, and devoured Montherlant instead of reading Ecclesiastes.

Nobody could be found to help us across the frontier. Finally we went to the Russian headquarters, bearing our passports stamped with numerous visas, and humbly solicited permits for foreign travel. With obvious disapproval, a swaggering, mustached officer thumbed through our little blue books decorated with the Polish eagle. The telephone rang. The officer scowled menacingly and barked into the receiver:

"Bachelor of what? Burn the damned diplomas! We haven't got time for all those ribbons and titles! In pharmacy? Well, say you're a pharmacist, then!"

He turned toward us: "Who are you?"

In good Russian, but without listing our degrees, we explained. Then the officer magnanimously offered us—poor refugees that we were—free tickets to Lvov, the capital of the Western Ukraine.

## II. Encirclement

IN THOSE days thousands of desperate people were fleeing before the German invasion. Nazi barbarism and the collapse of the Polish regime left only one way out: the East. Poles turned to their Slav neighbor for protection; Jews put their hopes in the great "libertarian, multi-national republic"; social-

ists put theirs in the "Cradle of the Revolution."

Almost everybody saw the Soviet occupation of eastern Poland as a surprise move to block the Germans rather than as a part of a cynical division of spoils arranged in advance. Never before in Poland's history had there been a more favorable moment for putting an end to all the old internecine quarrels, for burying the hatchet of civil strife and uniting Poles and non-Poles in gratitude to Soviet Russia. It wouldn't have taken much, at that time, to win over the lot of us.

It took some time for people to realize they had been taken in. . . .

Lvov was the scene of chaos, with ruins still smouldering. Lists of the dead were posted on the walls of houses. Panic-stricken refugees and soldiers jammed the streets. Legion Drive was yellow with autumn leaves, and along the length of it they were hastily setting up platforms, flag poles, and monuments of plank and plywood painted to imitate marble.

Lvov hadn't forgotten the first Russian occupation of 1914, when the Czar's army had brought truckloads of flour. This time the gifts were less utilitarian: the Russians put fresh flowers at the foot of the Mickiewicz monument in Mariatsky Square, and Jewish radio broadcasts were announced. There had been no real interference as yet; refugees were quietly registered along with Polish army officers. But from the moment that it became clear that the Soviet army was *occupying* Poland, not *liberating* her, the Poles began to flow back en masse towards the German zone.

Though the actual fighting had stopped, Lvov seemed to be still in a state of siege. Hundreds of people waited in long lines under the autumn rain for bread, vodka, a bit of candy. Numerous cabarets and restaurants sprang up where refugee served refugee; strange dives made their appearance, rendezvous for black-marketeers and former "café society," where people spoke in low voices of the chances of escaping to Hungary or slipping over the border to Rumania. But we were already encircled; all the frontiers were closed except for the partition line between eastern and western Poland, across which streams of refugees passed more or less illegally in both directions. The line between eastern Poland and Russia proper was



another matter: passage either way was impossible without special authorization, and private individuals didn't have a chance of getting it.

The first thing I did on arriving in Lvov was to go to the local Soviet headquarters and ask for a travel permit to Rumania. It seemed easy. I lived in Tel Aviv, in Palestine; my home and family were there; I had arrived in Poland four months before, and had been overtaken by the war; my passport and visas were all in order. I was told to come back in a week. Then they told me to come back in two weeks. On each visit I found different officials, all of whom protested ignorance of my case. Palestine, residence permit, visas were all Greek to them; my Polish documents might just as well have been in Latin.

I spent my days impatiently waiting. It never occurred to me that I simply just wouldn't be *allowed* to go home. If anyone had suggested that, I would have laughed. Deep in a jungle, I still reasoned in terms of European law and order. The friends with whom I had escaped from Lodz had no visas or residence permits for Palestine, and so at the end of October decided to go to Vilna, which the Red Army had just returned to Lithuania. I stayed behind. From Vilna, which they reached safely, they were able finally to make their way out of Europe. One got to New York, another to Brazil, a third to Australia. I managed to wind up in Palestine—but it took me seven years.

At that time, still well-fed and living more or less normally, I strongly resented my isolation and the ridiculousness of my situation. Lvov became intolerable. Two days after the Soviet plebiscite I took the train for Pinsk, my mother's home town, where I had lived as a child. Several times before in my wanderings that city had been a stopping place to tide me over a rough period.

**T**O GET to Pinsk, I had to go north via Rovno and Louninetz. The Ukraine of sugar and white bread stops at Rovno, where the landscape takes on a barren look; there the fogs of Byelo-Russia begin, lakes, dismal plains, wet little woods, and deserted railway stations flanked by piles of timber. At Rovno I was surprised by a sorry sight the like of which I had never before seen in Poland: a crowd of boys of between eighteen

and twenty, dressed in unbelievable rags, or hardly dressed at all, barefoot, or in ragged footgear, some wearing cast-off women's clothing, and rags knotted about their necks, were gathered in the railroad station. I wasn't the only one to be shocked. Where on earth had they come from? It turned out they were Red Army draftees from Leningrad on their way to military service. It was as though a door had been opened on another world, and we all felt sick to our stomachs.

Soviet Byelo-Russia began at Louninetz, where the walls of the station were covered with tatters of red cloth, and big posters. The place was crowded with peasants wearing *lapti* (shoes of birchbark) and carrying knapsacks. The Jews there were very different from Galician and Polish Jews; they were Litvaks, a healthy, robust, red-faced and rough-featured race—Jews of Polesie, with round heads and sharp little eyes, a people so dear to my heart I would recognize them at the other end of the world.

Once in Pinsk, I went immediately to the office for visas and alien registration. It was easy to convince the illiterate and obliging young official who received me that Poland was not my home and that I belonged in Palestine. He obviously had nothing against that but he lacked the authority to issue a visa. My request would have to be sent to Minsk, the capital of Byelo-Russia. When I saw that he could hardly write, I took the pen from his hand and filled out the questionnaire myself. To this day I don't know whether it was ever sent to Minsk. More than likely, the young man simply took it down the street to the local NKVD (state police), where the functionaries were less well-intentioned. The noose around my neck—that invisible noose around the neck of every Soviet citizen—was already tightening.

As time passed and no word came from Minsk, I guessed that matters hadn't turned out so well, and leaving Pinsk in a hurry, I again made for Sniatin on the Rumanian frontier. I spent three days there, wandering about the deserted streets. The refugees had gone; the Poles had disappeared. I was warned strongly against trying to cross the border: it couldn't be done. But there was still the Lithuanian frontier to the north. I could have kicked myself for not having gone there with my friends in the first place. How much time I had lost!



Lvov again. It was like a busy crossroads, and I found myself in the middle of a nondescript crowd of people milling around desperately while the earth slid from under their feet: money-changers, all kinds of speculators, persons selling the last of what they owned, new officials and Soviet employees, go-getters and refugees.

Many of these people, like myself, had come to Poland just before the war. Grandmothers who had traveled hundreds of miles to spend a summer month with their grandchildren now found themselves on Soviet territory. Young people from Palestine suddenly became aware of their uncertain legal status, and felt cut off from everything going on around them; their one desire was permission to leave as soon as possible. To be a foreigner in the USSR is a crime.

Endless streams of new and tired refugees arrived from the German zone, further overcrowding the city. Late in December I went to Lida, on the Lithuanian frontier. It was on the railroad line from Baranovici to Vilna; Vilna at that time was the goal of all hopes, the doorway to liberty. I carried a knapsack and had very little money left. Lida was a far cry from the prosperity of Sniatin or the many restaurants in Lvov. It was intensely cold; miserable shops in ruins stood boarded up. There were refugees everywhere, new arrivals with flight across the border written on their faces. The city was overcrowded; not a bed was to be had, and for several nights in a row I slept on the hard ground, in a two-by-four shack, with some people I had met by chance. At meals I sat with rabbis in fur caps, and bearded Jews escaping from Soviet atheism and eager to reach Vilna, the Lithuanian Jerusalem.

Together, we formed a group of seven persons, and we arranged with a guide to help us across the frontier. I didn't have enough money, but my companions agreed to give me credit as far as Vilna, where I hoped to pay them back. I was in a terrible state of nerves because of the cold and discomfort in Lida, my illegal status, the nights passed on the fly, the filth, the anguish, and all the stupid confusion of those days. Finally, on the 28th of December, we were given the green light.

But we didn't get very far. Armed guards poured out of a cottage by the side of the road: as luck would have it, a police barrier had just been set up that same morning. They

stopped our sleds, in which our womenfolk were riding with our baggage stacked behind them. We were all taken back to Lida.

At the NKVD office, when I said that I had been on my way to Radoun, a small town about ten miles off, they advised me to find work in Lida and not try to go to Radoun, since that was forbidden. That was all there was to it.

Some of us stayed; other refugees left for Sventziany to try to cross the frontier there, and some of them succeeded in doing so in January. A Lvov family I knew got across the frontier near Lida, with their children, heavy baggage, and all. It cost them a fortune, but didn't save them from death; two years later the Germans murdered them along with the rest of the Jews in Vilna.

I HAD had enough of the whole business, and was sick to death. Being an outlaw didn't agree with me. On the 31st of December, 1939, after many difficulties, I boarded a train headed towards Pinsk. We arrived in Louninets at midnight. The Pinsk train wasn't due till six the next morning. I wandered about the station until I suddenly remembered that the New Year was being rung in all over the world at that moment. The New Year!—I shook off my depression and walked into town.

The narrow streets of the desolate little place were empty and silent, and the snow crunched under my feet; like the Wandering Jew, I dragged myself along, pack on my back. I stopped under a window, where from behind the closed shutters I could hear glad cries of "Happy New Year!" Here people were celebrating while I stood outside like a beggar. On an impulse, I knocked at the door. It opened and I looked into a warm, lighted corridor. It was a stroke of luck; just in that particular house the teachers of Louninets were celebrating New Year's Eve. I told them I was a teacher, too, and they took me at my word, and so I left my knapsack in the vestibule and joined the gathering. There was still some beer left.

Thus, among strangers and at a stranger's table, did I greet 1940, an appalling, star-crossed, blood-stained year, a year of misery in which evil triumphed, a year that brought slavery and death to millions of men, and to me the most extraordinary adventure of my life.



### III. The Story of a Disappointment

THIS is the story of a disappointment—though not of my own. I had never felt attracted to the Soviet regime, never had any faith in the scientific value of its doctrine, or in the morality of its political institutions. My attitude towards the USSR was one neither of illusion nor of declared hostility, but rather that of a foreigner pure and simple.

When the Red Army entered Poland the mass of the population of Western Ukraine and Byelo-Russia were deeply grateful, and put all their hopes on the Russians. Man naturally believes in the good will of every new regime until he has proof to the contrary. As long as he hasn't been knocked down he is inclined to be optimistic, and even after having been knocked down, he still hopes it was only a misunderstanding.

How could the Soviet government, in the space of one winter, have made an enemy of everyone in the territory it occupied, regardless of class, national, or political differences? The explanation of this is very much to the point, since it will give an idea of the methods and technique of Sovietization in general. In Pinsk, I was able to follow this process through its various stages.

First, the officials of the original Polish government disappeared before our eyes. Nobody was concerned, however, and I doubt if a second thought was given to their fate. Yet the method at work, typically Bolshevik, required not merely their dismissal, but their liquidation *in toto*. Thus they disappeared without leaving a trace.

Then came the turn of the *ossadniki*. During its twenty years of independence, the Polish regime had parceled up many of the great estates on its eastern borders, and installed independent farmers on them—not local Byelo-Russians (or White Russians), but Polish settlers, soldiers who had distinguished themselves in the Russo-Polish War of 1920. These increased the Polish ethnic element in the eastern provinces, and were intended to prop the Polish state in a non-Polish area. But in twenty years they had become integrated with the local population, and their children spoke its tongue as their own. It seemed not only that they would not Polonize the Byelo-Russians, but that, on the contrary, the Byelo-Russian peasants would absorb and assimilate them, as they had already assimilat-

ed the Polish small gentry of their country.

The local population would never have made trouble for these *ossadniki*, who were farmers like themselves. Soviet rule, however, coming from *outside*, classed the *ossadniki* as enemies and deported them, just as the Germans deported Jews. The fate of these Polish settlers made a strong impression on the Jews of Pinsk. They were taken away in the heart of winter, in a bitter frost. Rumors were circulated of unheated trains that had stood in the station for two whole days, and of mothers throwing the frozen corpses of their children out of the windows of padlocked cars. These crimes, in true Hitler style, spread fear.

The liquidation of the *ossadniki* was followed by the systematic mass deportation, to the interior of the USSR, of all people of any influence in their localities, all those who were socially active or held important posts. Not only were the peasant middle class, the intellectuals, and patriotic Poles liquidated, but everybody, Byelo-Russian and Ukrainian alike, who had any recognized authority. The more popular they were, the worse it went with them. Most of them died somewhere in northern Russia.

In Pinsk, the next move was directed at the town Jews. The local fifth column helped draw up a list of the "leisure elements," which included storekeepers, furniture dealers, lawyers, merchants—hundreds and hundreds of people in all. All these Jews were expelled from the cities and sent out into the little towns or the countryside, where nobody knew them and they lived as shelterless refugees.

This was, of course, better than Hitler's ghettos, but people were far from being able to make such comparisons at that time. The Jews affected considered their deportation a catastrophe, the wrecking of their whole lives. I remember those March nights of 1940, when I would wake and listen to appalling sounds in the darkness. The whole street would be weeping, and you could hear the distant screams and lamentations of women. "They've gone to the neighbors next door!" I could picture the entrance of armed men in the dead of night, the cries, the haste, the oaths, the threats, two hours' time to gather together one's belongings. And the next morning, the store next door, where only yesterday you could buy cheese and butter, was desolate and shuttered, its doors barred as after a pogrom. A feeling of indignation and revolt



spread among the peaceful inhabitants of Pinsk against a regime whose minions rushed into their houses at midnight and destroyed their lives.

**T**HE next measure brought about the Sovietization of the schools, and the closing of newspapers, libraries, and publishing houses. Others were to be set up in their stead, and on the standard Soviet models. This "extirpation of culture" was accomplished grossly and mechanically, like pulling healthy teeth and replacing them with false ones. In effect, we were denied the right to teach our children anything else but Communism, were not allowed to read what we chose, or to think and live as we had a mind to. Nor was this operation performed with the aid of an anesthetic.

Pinsk had a Jewish school of the "Tarbut" group, the pride of the city, with seven hundred pupils and a good library; it was the citadel of Zionism, the center of Hebrew education, lovingly nurtured by the Jewish community of Pinsk. Now the Russians forced the Tarbut teachers to conduct their courses in Yiddish instead of Hebrew; Bialik and Tschernikovsky became forbidden authors overnight; Hebrew books were withdrawn from circulation. The students resisted. That winter, boys and girls continued to learn the proscribed language in secret; they swore not to forget Zion, not to let themselves be torn away from their national culture. It must not be forgotten that every family in Pinsk had relatives or friends in Palestine. Of course, this youthful resistance couldn't have lasted very long, even if Hitler had not invaded Russia. It would have died out of itself, or been crushed by the camps and the deportations, as all attempts at national independence are in the USSR, Jewish and otherwise.

The liquidation of the Jewish political bodies and organs of Jewish social life in Pinsk was completed by the spring of 1940. The heads of the Bund had been arrested and deported; in April the Zionists were singled out and each of them condemned to eight years in concentration camps. Systematically and unpitifully, every active element that might conceivably have offered resistance to the "reeducation of the masses" was rooted out. All independent thought, all potential opposition was outlawed. The only protection was to efface oneself, to lose oneself in the crowd, not to stand out in any way.

The Soviet regime could not feel safe until the last vestiges of any Jewish cultural and political life that had existed before 1939 had been totally erased. The destruction was carried out blindly and mechanically, without hate and without pity, by newcomers from Soviet Russia supported by police power. And its victim was a society with living and creative traditions, with vitality, youthful pride, and a culture infinitely superior to that of its executioners. This society, accustomed in the past to criticizing openly every move of a Polish government whose absolute authority it had never recognized, now found itself dominated by a callous, brutal, stupid force.

But it wasn't enough to paralyze people by disarming them politically and depriving them of their active members and leaders. Even then, a man still had one retreat left: he could withdraw into his private life. Like a snail, he could retreat into his shell, bury himself in family and friends, maintain his life with things put aside for a rainy day, and memories of happier times. But not under the Soviet regime.

**A**T THE beginning of 1940, except for speculators and those with unknown resources, we all became employees of the Soviet administration. Up till then freedom of work had existed. But now we were made part of the forced-labor system. The change came about gradually, but some of us already knew what was in store—knew that in the USSR one's place of work was fixed, that to quit any employment without permission was severely punished, that it was easier to get a divorce than to leave an unpleasant job.

The terms and conditions of work under the Soviets came as another shock to the people of Pinsk. The state wasn't a private enterprise where you were free to insist on returning home after eight hours of work. The state demanded respect, the state expected zeal and devotion from its new citizens. The workers of Pinsk weren't in the habit of working overtime and on Sundays and holidays; nor were they accustomed—when their work was done and they were ready to go home to dinner—to attend compulsory meetings and feign enthusiasm in response to speeches; nor did they enjoy not being paid regularly. The fact that conditions of work and social security were worse in the USSR than they had been in bourgeois Poland was a discovery for most.



Little by little, the enthusiasm of the first days began to wane. The past began to appear in another light. At factory meetings orators would remind the workers with pathos of their terrible exploitation under the Poles when they had had to work for only sixty zlotys a month. But Soviet wages averaged a hundred and eighty rubles a month—which amounted to only thirty pre-war zlotys. If what the Poles had done was exploitation, what could one say of the Russians?

It was impossible to console oneself by thinking that all this was merely temporary, the effects of a period of transition, and that normal life would reestablish itself. It became clear beyond any reasonable doubt that conditions of life in the USSR itself were even worse. Local workers who in September 1939 had gone voluntarily to the Donbas and other places in Russia, and then fled back, gave us a full report. But we didn't need their word for it. Soviet citizens arriving in the devastated towns of Western Ukraine or Byelo-Russia were so delighted to be there that you didn't have to cross-examine them to find out what things were like back home. What to us was dire poverty was sheer luxury to them. Butter and bacon were sold in the markets of Pinsk at prices one-tenth of those in Soviet Ukraine. And the middlemen still had hidden reserves. To come to our country, miserable as it was, meant to be clothed, to eat one's fill, and save something for the children's shoes. The people of Pinsk were dumfounded to see the Russians wearing night-shirts by day, sleeping without sheets or blankets, and ordering ten glasses of tea at a time in the canteens. Why ten? That's easy: they had to take while the taking was good. Half an hour later there wouldn't be any tea left for the local half-wits, and the man would sit gloating over the rows of glasses as he distributed them to his friends.

The Russians were cautious, and at first made a secret of what things were like at home. But after several months among us our Soviet tenant no longer had any fear of his host, and his tongue loosened, especially when he was drinking. Then we learned the truth that had been hidden for so long: "You didn't know when you had it good! You were living in a paradise. You had everything, you weren't afraid! Us?"—and here the man would tear at his overcoat—"Do you see what I'm wearing? Our life is as gray as that!"

And we believed him, because our life too had become gray and oppressive, as though they had put us in a cave.

THE workers went to the factories reluctantly, the cooperatives were empty, the canteens badly kept, the barbers gave bad haircuts, the craftsmen turned out bad work. To counteract this, everybody had to be supervised; and the supervisors had to have someone to keep an eye on them; and so the NKVD held its club over everyone's head.

The Byelo-Russian peasants who had brought milk and eggs into my mother's kitchen for twenty-five years weren't afraid to speak their minds. One of them said: "For twenty years the Polish government tried to make Poles out of us, and they didn't succeed. In two months the Bolsheviks have made Poles out of us."

A thousand rules and regulations, lack of contact with the rest of the world, suppression of political parties, missing neighbors deported to unknown places—this was the picture. In the long run the people of Pinsk who hadn't been deported, and continued to live, for better or worse, under the new conditions, would perhaps have accepted their misfortune (and especially that of others). Even the shock of finding out that people lived much worse in the USSR than in Poland would have lessened with time.

When I ask myself why there were soon no Soviet sympathizers left in my city, why there was no one—aside from a clearly defined and clearly designated group that stood out like an island in the sea—who did not want to return to pre-war conditions, the answer is obvious. It wasn't because our pre-war situation, especially that of the Jews, had been so perfect that it couldn't have been changed for the better; it wasn't because we were afraid to freeze through a winter or be deprived of white bread, or because we were too backward to understand what was good for us. I dare say, that in those days the people of Pinsk learned to understand—if not consciously, at least in their hearts—the meaning of the word "freedom." In the proclamation announcing the annexation of Poznan and Lodz to Germany, the Nazi authorities spoke of the "great honor and immense good fortune" bestowed on these two Polish cities by the Germans. That was a lie. But what happened in Pinsk, in all of Byelo-Russia,



and in the Eastern Ukraine under the Russians, was the same lie. Somebody held our mouths shut and spoke for us. Somebody had walked into our houses and into our lives, and had taken possession of them without our consent.

#### IV. If the Prophet Elijah . . .

LET us make a brief digression into the realm of the miraculous. Let us imagine something impossible. Let us visualize a fantastic and supernatural situation: what would have happened in the city of Pinsk had the prophet Elijah appeared there early in the summer of 1940?

Much time has elapsed since that summer, and though none of us is a prophet, and it is hard for us to enter into the frame of mind of a prophet, in the present case we can without difficulty imagine how a person gifted with supernatural foresight would have felt in Pinsk.

Such a person would have beheld a city on the verge of perdition and tens of thousands of persons doomed to die. Under the most favorable circumstances these people had no more than two years to live. Thousands of them were destined to perish sooner.

These people were in a trap without exit. On one side was the German border and the Gestapo. Anyone crossing that border died. On the other side was the Russian border. The "wise Stalin policy" tightly sealed this border. Not one of the dwellers of the doomed city could force his way across the line separating the Russian zone of occupation in Poland from the Soviet Union.

Thirty thousand Jews in Pinsk, and nearly two million in the entire Soviet zone of occupation, found themselves in a blind alley.

But since they did not know what the future held in store for them, they were not particularly distressed. For one thing, they did not foresee that they would soon fall into the hands of the Germans. Secondly, they could not imagine that such an event would spell their extermination. Thirdly, they all hoped that after the war a state of normalcy would be restored, and each visualized the future in rosy hues. Some saw it in Palestine, others in a democratic Poland, still others in the super-democratic Soviet Union.

And so, let us imagine that the prophet Elijah came into this city and said to its poor and shortsighted people: "Here is the truth

about your lives. Those who put their trust in the Soviet Union ought to know that in a year the Germans will come and lock you in ghettos. Within a year, you, your wives, your old people, and your children will be slaughtered. And anybody who now runs towards the Germans will be running towards his death."

And let us imagine still another miracle—that the people of the city of Pinsk, who as a rule responded to prophecy unwillingly, now believed the prophet and said to him: "What should we do, then, Prophet Elijah? We see no way out. On the right there is the Gestapo; on the left the 'wise Stalin policy'; under our feet lies the earth that will soon be our grave; above us stretch the heavens. Take us to heaven, Prophet Elijah, for we see no other way."

And the prophet Elijah would have answered wrathfully: "Your place in heaven is reserved for you. Seek a place on earth where you can stay alive."

And they would have said: "We do not know what to do. Show us the way to life."

And the prophet Elijah would have shown them the way to life.

And in fact, there was a way to life for millions of these Jews. We do not now have to guess and rack our brains as to what it was. So strange was this way, it lay beyond the mental and moral powers of the Jews. Looking back, it is clear now how they should have acted.

The prophet Elijah could have advised them one thing above all—to desist from falsehood and pretenses.

Did the teachers of the Tarbut high school really need to gather and pass obsequious resolutions renouncing the Hebrew language and Hebrew education? They had not been transformed overnight from Zionists into Communists. They did what they actually did because they were full of fear and hoped to avoid persecution and the loss of their students. So they took the "opportune" path. They hastened to agree with the enemies of Palestine and of Hebrew.

Yet the real road to life for these teachers and for hundreds of their students was to announce: "We appeal to the government to confirm the rights of our school because its language and its program of instruction are in accordance with our desires and we will not consent to their betrayal."



Thousands of Jews who did not want Soviet citizenship might not have voted in the elections to the Supreme Soviet or accepted the Soviet passports that were foisted upon them. Instead, they might have said aloud what they all thought: "We do not need your citizenship and we ask to be registered for emigration to Palestine."

And if there were opponents of Zionism in their midst at that time—and there were—these could have at least proclaimed aloud that the existing regime and state of affairs were unacceptable to them. For, in fact and in their deepest convictions, they did find the regime unacceptable.

Granted, such a campaign of civil disobedience would have been pure madness. I do not for a moment believe that such a thing would have been possible without the personal intervention of the prophet Elijah. But before my mind's eye I clearly see the tranquil residents of the city of Pinsk.

For instance, there was Dr. I., my personal friend, a very good doctor and a lovable person. In his reception room there hung a framed portrait of Maimonides with a lengthy inscription in Hebrew. The most prominent spot was occupied by a blue and white JNF box. This Dr. I. had never concealed the fact that he loved his people and felt attached to Palestine. He did not remove Maimonides' portrait even after the Soviets took over. But why did he, the owner of two brick houses and a man devoted to tradition, turn into an ardent Soviet patriot in the course of a single week? It is possible that he feared for his houses. It is possible that he felt it was necessary to do as he did. In any case, it was a lie. What Dr. I. really wanted was to be left in peace, or to be given the chance to go to Palestine, and if not there, then to America. Certainly he did not want the Bolsheviks.

**C**IVIL disobedience would have had fateful consequences for the Jews of Pinsk. The Soviet government does not joke about such things. The Bolsheviks would have been surprised at first, since they were not used to hearing Jews speak out to them frankly and clearly what was in their minds. First of all, they would have hunted down some of the leaders, and in the end they would have deported all Jews, together with their wives, children, sacred objects and personal belongings, from the border districts.

The Jews would not have been the first or the only people to whom this had happened in the Soviet Union. They would have found it hard in Central Asia or the Yakutsk. Many would have perished. But, on the whole, they would not only have survived the war, but by means of their opposition they would have provided a decisive argument in favor of Jewish national culture and the Jewish national movement. The executioners of the "wise Stalin policy" would have learned that Hebrew and Zionism had some roots in the Jewish people.

These people had a way to life, and, as in all such cases, the way to life would have been that of honest and open struggle. But alas, no prophet explained this to them.

They were all intelligent, practical people. Had anyone told them that it was never desirable or, for that matter, practical, to compromise with what was implacably hostile, they would not have argued. They would have said that such a person was out of his mind, that he was either a fool or a visionary—whereas we ourselves have children, homes, jobs, for all of which we are responsible. This is what intelligent people would have said, and they would have been right from their own—intelligent—point of view.

If it is possible to draw a lesson from later events, then it is this: common sense is not always the best guide, especially when its obverse side consists in ordinary cowardice.

For the past two thousand years Jews have been accommodating themselves to the surrounding world, and during these two thousand years their shrewd calculations have proved founded on sand, and their history—as in the case of the Jews of Pinsk—a chain of catastrophes and a way to death. What happened to the Jews of Pinsk was no exception. Nobody can guarantee to us, the survivors, that some time in the not distant future a situation may not arise such as that which arose in Pinsk in the summer of 1940. Enemies on the right, enemies on the left, the empty sky above, and a yawning grave at our feet. And there will be no prophet Elijah, no new Moses, to lead us dry-shod through the parted waves.

If the lessons of history have any value, we will then recall the history of the Jews of Pinsk, who perished because until the end they lacked the courage to be true to the truth and themselves.